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House of Representatives

HUMANITARIAN VISAS STRENGTHEN OUR BORDER SECURITY!

HON. BOB FILNER
OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MR. FILNER: Mr. Chairman, although this amendment is not in order, and I recognize that, I would just like to tell the chairman that I have proposed it out of frustration with what is going on at the border between California and Mexico.

I represent that total border, and I would say that in our rush after September 11 to secure the border and protect the homeland, we have made very many important steps, many necessary steps; but we also made some wrong decisions, decisions which in fact harm our national security, harm our close relationships with Mexico, and in fact set us back in our attempt to be secure.

I refer specifically today to the practice that has been abolished at the border of giving discretion to port directors to

allow children for either medical or humanitarian or cultural reasons to cross the border on a 1-day visa; to grant a waiver to the normal visa requirements, a waiver of normal requirements that are beyond the reach of many poor people in Mexico.

They cross the border for important reasons. For example, in my district in the city of Calexico, there is a clinic called the Valley Orthopedic Clinic. For over 40 years it has treated poor children for deformities and birth defects, which gives them a future; and, in fact, they have treated over 125,000 low-income children from Mexico.

The practice had been for decades to allow the port director the discretion to grant this 1-day visa, a 1-day

(over)

humanitarian waiver to allow that child to get treatment, to correct a cleft palate or a clubbed foot or a pinky that was not there at birth, to give children who could not afford it in their homeland an opportunity for a future.

After September 11, that authority, discretionary authority for humanitarian waivers, was taken away from the port director. And so children in need of medical help, school children who would march with their counterparts in America on Christmas parades, visit the world famous San Diego Zoo, go to other cultural events with American counterparts; that was taken away. That has not helped the security of our Nation.

These children are not terrorists. These children are, in fact, engaging in diplomatic relationships that strengthen our two countries' relationships, strengthen our border and give us more security; and yet we have denied now that authority to the port director under the name of homeland security.

So all my amendment would do, and I am sorry we cannot talk about it today,

would have said the port directors at the seven or eight ports of entry in my district, others in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, would have the authority to grant these humanitarian waivers. The amendment would not make it easier for terrorists that come to the country. The amendment would not affect the number of legal or illegal immigrants living in our country. The amendment would not force immigration officials to offer waivers.

So I hope as we go through our appropriations and our authorization process for homeland security we take a rational approach, we do not go overboard in taking away discretionary authority from our border officials in the name of homeland security, which actually sets us back.

So I hope that this body will take that issue up in the future. I thank the body for giving me a few minutes to talk about what is going on at the border, and I hope that we can do things that really strengthen our security and not weaken it in the future.